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THE BLACK-FOOTED FERRET

The black-footed ferret is one of America's rarest and least known wild animals. It leads a solitary life and emerges from its underground den mainly at night. That's why so little is known about the habits of this mysterious North American weasel. Its long body (about 23 inches) and short legs give it a "low-slung" appearance, except when running-then it "loops" along like the otter or mink. It is named for its black paws, which contrast with a brownish, yellow body. A mask-like black band runs across its eyes.

The ferret once made its home throughout the Great Plains where its favorite food was the fat little prairie dog. Its facility in "ferreting" out prey in the labyrinth of burrows is in keeping with this everyday expression. Prairie dog towns were as much a part of the Plains as the vast herds of buffalo. In fact, the prairie dog's environment depended largely upon the huge buffalo that grazed and trampled the tall grasses, leaving the "dog's" favorite food-succulent weeds and short grass.

When the great herds of bison disappeared, "dog towns" became scarce. Their open burrows were a constant threat to livestock, and to prevent broken legs and range damage, the town builders were poisoned on a wide scale. The ferret's numbers and range shrank with that of the prairie dogs, until today nearly all remaining ferrets are reported from South Dakota, with an occasional sighting in neighboring States.

A study of the ferret's life history and environment is being conducted in South Dakota by State and Federal wildlife biologists

in an effort to save the animal from extinction. Steps proposed include preserving prairie dog towns where ferrets are present, setting up sanctuaries, and attempting to increase the numbers through captive propagation. Such measures, it is hoped will insure the continued existence of this rare animal that remains a mysterious member of the native Great Plains family of wildlife.

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